NINA KATCHADOURIAN

Found in Translation

Via a series of multimedia works featuring her family and other animals, the New York-based artist explores the many ways in which we communicate and misconstrue the world.

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NINA KATCHADOURIAN IS SPEAKING FROM HER CAR outside her Brooklyn home, submitting to the familiar New York morning ritual of moving her vehicle before the street-cleaning truck shows up. Alternate side parking's a mundane but apt metaphor for the work of an artist who has performed some absurd automotive arrangements in the past—for CAR PARK (1994), a public art event made in collaboration with Steve Mack and Mark Tribe at Southwestern College, California; she spent a cloudy day organizing thousands of cars by color into 14 separate parking lots. For Natural Car Alarm (2002), she equipped three automobiles with alarm systems that blared birdsong. More than this, the unwieldy regime to which her adopted city submits its car owners is somehow akin to the systemic absurdity that exercises her art. Katchadourian is a consummate experimenter, but doomed arrangements, senseless hierarchies, eviscerate taxonomies.

One such, she notes wryly, is her own family. "We're such a scattered lot... the fact that my parents ever met is a strange thing." This is no exaggeration, so let me see if I can get this right: Katchadourian's father, Herant, is a Turkish-Armenian, raised in Beirut, where as well as his two native languages he learned to speak Arabic and French. There he met Nina's mother, Stina, who grew up in Finland as part of the Swedish-speaking minority. He learned Swedish, she Armenian; they moved to the United States, and have never lost their (now somewhat pauperized) accents, neither of which their daughter has inherited.

The mix made, Nina says, for the occasionally bewildering family gathering; notably Christmas dinners, at which her mother, a literary translator, functions as a kind of toewrapper between the members of her polyglot (but not, as it were, omniglot) family. The vagaries of translation and mistranslation have long been familiar to the artist, and not only in terms of language itself.

So far so cosmopolitan, but Katchadourian is not so much interested in ordinary diversity (nor cultural difference as such) than in the troublesome proximity, the "tiny but undeniable gap" between the voices, bodies and minds of the closest family members. There is, she says, "a strange feeling of accident around being related." Noticing
In Talking Popcorn (2001), Katchadourian rigged up a popcorn machine with a computer that interpreted the patterns of its seemingly random pops as Morse code.
that links her interest in literal translation and her lifelong fascination for storytellers: “I have a very long-standing fascination... an absolute obsession with shipwreck stories,” she now says, before recounting the story of Douglas Robertson, a Scottish farmer who in 1972 tried to sail round the world with his family, they spent almost 40 days clinging to a raft in the ocean. She’s interested, she says, in “the creative mind under enormous pressure”, its marshalling of resources, flashes of insight and laborious efforts to maintain life and hope. In Endeavour (2002), a nine-minute video in which film of Ernest Shackleton’s Antarctic expedition is projected on one of her teeth as she smiles at the camera, Katchadourian parodies her own obsession with such extremes; she too, literally, to grin and bear it, but eventually nature takes over and the artist starts to drool lower her hair.

If there’s a strand in her work that best exemplifies, then rather complicates, her interest in translation, kinship and creative misunion, it is undoubtedly her numerous works that deploy, refer to or collaborate with animals. Here Katchadourian reveals the absurdity of the taxonomic systems that seek to frame the animal world, and at the same time conjures up that reason, or at least the taste for prodigious system-building, may not be entirely the preserve of humans. In the past, she has staged meticulous interventions in the lives and habitats of creatures of various levels of benignity and anthropomorphism. She has cross-dressed a snake and a rat in outlandish costumes. She has repaired broken spiders’ webs with fine red thread, only to find the next day that the imitated arachnids have dispensed with her clumsy repairs. In Gift/Gift (1998), she introduced the four letters of the title of her video (to Swedish gift means poison), again made of red thread, into a web - not watched its owner patiently remove them one by one.

But it’s in three recent works, shown at Sara Melzer Gallery, New York, in 2007, that the animals really begin to rumble to the viewer. Zoe (2007) is a 14-screen video installation that draws on footage of Katchadourian having been shooting for years at 300 around the world. It’s an extraordinarily disorienting work, even more so as one spends time with it and realises that a patch of gleaming blue plumage that fills the screen or a furry expanse that looks like a face are not going to resolve themselves into recognisable beasts or lovable critters. Zoe, says the artist, “has this very strange agenda; they want to assure us that we and the animals are actually alive; that this is after all the source of our interest and empathy with them. But Katchadourian’s Zoe is evidence only of their strangeness and of the sheer oddity of standing before them and expecting to be able to translate their movements and cries into our ways of making meaning.

Equally unsettling is Fugitive (2007); a circle of six monitors, angled upwards from the gallery floor, that show, one after the other in looped sequence, a corral of turkeys being driven down a parallel wire, high above its enclosure at the Washington, DC, zoo. It’s blanked, recalls Katchadourian, “like some weird escaping concept wearing a fugitive jacket”. As the creature slowly makes its way from one screen to another, the viewer starts to walk in a circle like a caged animal. I find that place very self, says the artist. At the Sara Melzer show, it contrasted with the frankly hilarious found photographic piece The Continuum of Cate (2007), a line of tiny images that depict variously repulsive or endearing animals. If the concept of beauty is among our habitually least consistent ways of taxonoming the world around us, the notion of cute is both more innocent and more knowing at the same time. The urge to rearrange the images in The Continuum of Cate was overpowering, to mess with the artist’s definitive decision that a kitten is cuter than a toad, a chicken uglier than a koala. In other words, she invited us to tinker with the order of nature itself.

There is something of the meretorean lobbyist or meddler in all of Katchadourian’s work — she apparently cannot stop pulling things apart and reconfiguring them in eccentric ways so that their original constructedness becomes clear, often for the first time. That she is not always sure what she is doing (when she helps a spider with its web, or Thes, a mushroom with a punture repair kit); precisely the point nor was the inventive insect, or the adventurous mycoplasmic graft she has pulled apart, or the culture that invented a language in the first place, before Katchadourian came along and translated it into her own curious, obsessive, meticulous script and sublimely funny tone of voice.  

CERCA, Series: Nina Katchadourian is on show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego from 3 May to 6 July. See listings for further details.

Sara Melzer Gallery

www.saramelzer.com